

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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WORLD'S FIRST BALD EAGLE "EGG-PLANT"

A unique transplant of bald eagle eggs from Minnesota to Maine--the first ever--has gotten underway, Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service Director Lynn A. Greenwalt announced.

The experiment involves taking six bald eagle eggs from active nests in the Chippewa National Forest in Minnesota, where eagle populations are stable, and placing them in bald eagle nests in Maine, where pollution has apparently affected eagle egg hatching success in recent years. Eggs from the Maine nests will be taken to the Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, for incubation and pollution studies.

The experiment is a joint effort of the Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the Maine and Minnesota Conservation Departments, the National Audubon Society, and private citizens. Biologists expect to learn the answers to many questions from this pilot study.

The main objective of the project is to shore up the bald eagle population in Maine while pollutant levels are declining and before the existing adults die out from natural causes. Close watch of the transplanted eggs will be maintained by Federal biologists, the Maine Department of Conservation, the Maine Audubon Society, and citizens. If eaglets hatch, they will be banded before fledging in the hope that their future movements can be documented and studied.

Biologists also hope to find out if the eggs taken from the nests in Maine can be incubated and hatched. Further, they expect to learn the precise pollutant contents of the Maine eggs if they are infertile or fail to hatch.

Secondary objectives include determining what the parent eagles in Minnesota will do when their eggs are taken. It is hoped they will lay and hatch another clutch.

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The experiment, too, is designed to determine if future bald eagle transplants through the foster parent approach are, in fact, feasible, what the costs will be, and what are the best field techniques.

The bald eagle population in Maine has been declining for many years. Only 30 to 40 pairs of eagles remain in the State. For the past decade, eagles have failed to produce the minimum level of young needed to maintain a stable population. Environmental contamination from DDT, its derivatives, dieldrin, and other contaminants are thought to contribute greatly to this reproductive failure. Eggs collected and analyzed from eagle nests in Maine in 1968 and 1969 showed high levels of DDE, the primary metabolite of DDT, and the insecticide dieldrin. Neither DDT nor dieldrin have been used in Maine since 1970, and prospects are good for the eventual return of an environment which would support a healthy bald eagle population. The lower Kennebec drainage area in Maine, where the eagle situation is most grim, is slated to receive the transplanted eggs.

Minnesota eagles were selected for the experiment because the bald eagles there are faring much better with a known population of over 100 active nests of eagle pairs that in 1973 produced 113 eaglets. By contrast Maine eagles produced only seven eaglets from 19 nests in 1973.

In the "lower 48" States, in 1973, 627 active bald eagle nests from which over 500 young were hatched were located in a Fish and Wildlife Service survey. In the U.S. south of Alaska it is estimated that there are about 1,000 nesting pairs of bald eagles. Alaska's bald eagle population is between 30,000 and 55,000 birds.

The eggs taken from Minnesota have been placed in an insulated suitcase warmed by a hot water bottle, and flown to Maine by a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist where they will be placed in six nests as soon as they arrive.

Any eggs laid by the Maine eagles will be removed from each of the six nests slated to receive the transplants.

The Maine eggs will be flown to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. Tests will be run immediately to see if any are viable. If any eggs hatch, the eaglets will be returned to Maine nests. If any of the Minnesota transplanted eggs fail to hatch in the Maine nests, they will be removed and analyzed.

Fish and Wildlife Service Director Lynn A. Greenwalt said, "A project of this nature has many risks. We don't know, for example, if disturbance of the parent eagles in Maine will cause them to desert their nest. We must, however, accept the possibility that some of our objectives will not be met."

The concept of egg transplants was tried before by the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1968 and 1969 when osprey eggs were exchanged between nests in Maryland and Connecticut. The foster parents readily accepted the eggs and successfully hatched and fledged the young. The results showed a direct relationship between nest success and pollution levels in both States.